

# American Mahjong Joker Exchange Checklist

## Joker Basics

- 8 jokers in every American mahjong set
- Jokers substitute for any tile in a group of **3 or more** (pung, kong, quint, sextet)
- Jokers **cannot** be used in pairs or singles
- Jokers **cannot** be discarded (NMJL rules)
- You may exchange a natural tile for a joker in any player's exposed group — but only **on your turn**, and only with the **exact** tile the joker is replacing
- An exchange takes the place of your draw from the wall



## Before You Exchange: The Five Question Check

#	Question	IF YES	IF NO
1	Does this joker help me complete a specific group I need for mahjong?	Continue ↓	Don't exchange.
2	Can I give up the natural tile without breaking a pair I need?	Continue ↓	Don't exchange.
3	Am I playing an exposed hand (not concealed)?	Continue ↓	Go to Concealed Hand Check below ↓
4	Is the information I reveal by exchanging okay at this stage of the game?	Continue ↓	Hold off.
5	Does this exchange bring me closer to mahjong — not just "feel good"?	Exchange!	Don't exchange.

## Concealed Hand Check

If you're playing a concealed hand, add these extra filters:

- ✓ Will this exchange reveal which hand I'm pursuing?
- ✓ Could opponents narrow down my hand from the tile I swap in?
- ✓ Is there a less "visible" way to get what I need (drawing from the wall)?

**Rule of thumb:** If the exchange could blow your cover, **hold the joker you have and stay quiet.**

## Pair Protection Rule

**Never break a pair you need to chase a joker — unless:**

- ✓ The joker lets you pivot to a clearly better hand on the card
- ✓ You have a realistic path to re-forming the pair (multiple tiles still unaccounted for)
- ✓ You're early in the game and flexibility outweighs commitment

**Remember:** Jokers can't fill pairs. Pairs are irreplaceable. Protect them.

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## Endgame Exchange Timing

When the wall is getting short (roughly 15–20 tiles or fewer remaining):

- ⚠️ Every exchange broadcasts information — assume the table is watching.
- ⚠️ A late exchange often signals “I’m one tile from mahjong” — both when you do it and when you see others do it.
- ✅ Exchange late only if it directly completes your hand or the natural tile you're giving up is already widely visible (in discards/exposures).
- 🔴 If the exchange gets you close but not finished — and alerts the table — draw from the wall instead.

## Reading Other Players' Joker Moves

Use this quick-read guide to interpret what opponents' exposures and exchanges are telling you:

What you see	What it likely means
Exposed group with no jokers	They're saving jokers for a harder-to-fill group (kong/quint)
Exposed group with 2+ jokers	Joker-rich but tile-poor — watch their discards for abandoned hand clues
Player exchanges then immediately discards	They likely just completed a group — they're getting close
Player doesn't exchange when they clearly could	Possibly on a concealed hand, or they don't hold the natural tile
Player exchanges very late in the game	High alert — they are very likely one tile from mahjong

## Joker Bait: Red Flags

Before you grab that "easy" joker off the table, watch for these warning signs:

- ▶ The joker has been sitting exposed for several turns, and nobody has taken it
- ▶ The exposure seems disconnected from the obvious hands on the current card
- ▶ The player who exposed it has been unusually quiet — no calls, no urgency
- ▶ Swapping in your natural tile would give that player the last copy they need

When in doubt, don't swap. A joker in someone else's exposure is still a joker out of their hand.

## Quick Golden Rules

1. Jokers are tools, not trophies. Only exchange when it serves your hand.
2. Protect your pairs. Jokers can't help there.
3. Information is currency. Every exchange spends some.
4. Count the jokers. Always try to track where all 8 are.
5. Stay calm near the wall's end. Patience wins more games than impulse.